

Tuvaluan language

Tuvaluan /tuːvəˈluːən/^[4] often called **Tuvalu**, is a Polynesian language of or closely related to the Ellicean group spoken in Tuvalu. It is more or less distantly related to all other Polynesian languages, such as Hawaiian, Maori, Tahitian, Samoan, and Tongan, and most closely related to the languages spoken on the Polynesian Outliers in Micronesia and Northern and Central Melanesia. Tuvaluan has borrowed considerably from Samoan, the language of Christian missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.^{[5][6]}

The population of Tuvalu is approximately 10,837 people (2012 Population & Housing Census Preliminary Analytical Report)^[7] There are estimated to be more than 13,000 Tuvaluan speakers worldwide. In 2015 it was estimated that more than 3,500 Tuvaluans live in New Zealand, with about half that number born in New Zealand and 65 percent of the Tuvaluan community in New Zealand is able to speak Tuvaluan.^[8]

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Tuvaluan	
Te Ggana Tuuvalu	
Native to	 Tuvalu, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand
Native speakers	10,000 in Tuvalu (2015) ^[1] 2,000 in other countries (no date) ^[2]
Language family	<div>Austronesian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Malayo-Polynesian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Oceanic<ul style="list-style-type: none">Polynesian<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ellicean–Eastern<ul style="list-style-type: none">Tuvalu–Eastern<ul style="list-style-type: none">Tuvaluan</div>
Official status	
Official language in	 Tuvalu
Language codes	
ISO 639-2	tvl (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=466)
ISO 639-3	tvl
Glottolog	tuva1244 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/tuva1244) ^[3]

History

Like all other Polynesian languages, Tuvaluan descends from an ancestral language, which historical linguists refer to as "Proto-Polynesian", which was spoken perhaps about 2,000 years ago.

Language influences

Tuvaluan has had significant contact with Gilbertese, a Micronesian language; Samoan; and, increasingly, English. Gilbertese is spoken natively on Nui, and was important to Tuvaluans when its colonial administration was located in the Gilbert Islands. Samoan was introduced by missionaries, and has had the most impact on the language. English's influence has been limited, but is growing.



Play media

Wikitongues recording of Paulo, a speaker of Tuvaluan

Phonology

Vowels

The sound system of Tuvaluan consists of five vowels (/i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /u/). All vowels come in short and long forms, which are contrastive.

Vowels

	Short		Long	
	Front	Back	Front	Back
<u>Close</u>	i	u	iː	uː
<u>Mid</u>	e	o	eː	oː
<u>Open</u>	a		aː	

There are no diphthongs so every vowel is sounded separately. Example: *taeao* ‘tomorrow’ is pronounced as four separate syllables (ta-e-a-o).^[9]

Consonants

Consonants

	<u>Labial</u>	<u>Alveolar</u>	<u>Velar</u>	<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Nasal</u>	m	n	ŋ ⟨g⟩	
<u>Plosive</u>	p	t	k	
<u>Fricative</u>	f v	s		(h)
<u>Lateral</u>		l		

/h/ is used only in limited circumstances in the Nukulaelae dialect.

The sound system of Tuvaluan consists of 10 or 11 consonants (/p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /f/, /v/, /s/, /h/, /l/), depending on the dialect. All consonants also come in short and long forms, which are contrastive. The phoneme /ŋ/ is written ⟨g⟩. All other sounds are represented with letters corresponding to their IPA symbols.

Phonotactics

Like most Polynesian languages, Tuvaluan syllables can either be V or CV. There is no restriction on the placement of consonants, although they cannot be used at the end of words (as per the syllabic restrictions). Consonant clusters are not available in Tuvaluan.

Phonology of loanwords

None of the units in the Tuvaluan phonemic inventory are restricted to loanwords only. English is the only language from which loanwords are currently being borrowed – loans from Samoan and Gilbertese have already been adapted to fit Tuvaluan phonology. More established, conventional English borrowings are more likely to have been adapted to the standard phonology than those that have been adopted more recently.^[10]

Stress, gemination and lengthening

Stress is on the penultimate mora. Geminated consonants have the following main functions:

- Pluralisation – e.g. *nofo* 'sit' (singular) v *nnofo* 'sit' (plural)
- Contraction of reduplicated syllable – e.g. *lelei* 'good' in Northern dialects becomes *llei* in Southern dialects.
- Contraction of the definite article *te* – e.g. *te tagata* 'the man' becomes *ttagata*.
- Differentiation of meaning between two words – e.g. *mmala* 'overcooked' v *mala* 'plague'^[11]

Long vowels can be used to indicate pluralisation or a differentiation of meaning.

Word order

Like many Polynesian languages, Tuvaluan generally uses a VSO word order, with the verb often preceded by a verb marker. However, the word order is very flexible, and there are more exceptions to the VSO standard than sentences which conform to it. Besnier (p. 134) demonstrates that VSO is statistically the least frequent word order, and OVS is the most frequent word order, but still believes VSO is syntactically the default.^[10] Often if emphasis is to be placed on a first person pronoun or personal name, then it may precede the verb so that the sentence structure becomes SVO.^[11]

Morphology

In Tuvaluan, there is virtually no inflectional or derivational morphology – Tuvaluan uses markers to indicate case, tense, plurality, etc. The table below, adapted from Jackson's *An Introduction to Tuvaluan*, outlines the main markers, although there are also negative and imperative derivatives. Vowel gemination can also sometimes illustrate semantic change.

Marker	Function/meaning
<i>e</i>	present tense marker
<i>ka</i>	future tense marker
<i>kai</i>	'ever'
<i>ke</i>	1. 'should' (imperative) 2. 'and', 'so that...'
<i>ke na</i>	imperative (polite)
<i>ko</i>	present perfect tense marker
<i>koi</i>	'still' (continuing action)
<i>ko too</i>	'too'
<i>o</i>	'and', 'to' (connector between verbs)
<i>ma</i>	'lest, if something should'
<i>mana</i>	'lest it should happen'
<i>moi</i>	'if only'
<i>ne</i>	past tense marker
(no marker)	imperative command

Reduplication is one of the most common morphological devices in Tuvalu, and works in a wide variety of ways. Firstly, it operates on verbs and adjectives. Jackson lists six ways it can function:

1. Intensification of action: e.g. *filemu* 'peaceful, quiet' : *fifilemu* 'to be very peaceful, quiet'
2. Diminished action: e.g. *fakalogo* 'to listen carefully, obey' : *fakalogologo* 'to listen casually'
3. Continued, repeated action: e.g. *tue* 'to shake, dust off' : *tuetue* 'to shake, dust off repeatedly'
4. A more widely distributed activity: e.g. *masae* 'to be ripped, torn' : *masaesae* 'ripped, torn in many places'
5. Pluralisation: e.g. *maavae* 'separated, divided' : *mavaevae* 'divided into many parts'
6. Change of meaning: e.g. *fakaoso* 'to provoke' : *fakaosooso* 'to tempt'^[11]

The prefix *faka-* is another interesting aspect of Tuvaluan. It operates as a 'causative' – to make a verb more 'active', or shapes an adjective 'in the manner of'. Jackson describes *faka-* as the most important prefix in Tuvaluan.^[11]

Examples:

Adjectives:

llei 'good' : *fakallei* 'to make good, better, reconcile'

aogaa 'useful' : *fakaaogaa* 'to use'

Verbs:

tele 'run, operate' : *fakatele* 'to operate, to run'

fua ‘to produce’ : *fakafua* ‘to make something produce’^[11]

Verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs

Tuvaluan tends to favour using verbs over nouns. Nouns can be formed from many verbs by adding the suffix *-ga*. In the Southern dialect, the addition of *-ga* lengthens the final vowel of the verb root of the new noun. Many nouns can also be used as verbs.^[11]

Tuvaluan relies heavily on the use of verbs. There are many ‘state of being’ words which are verbs in Tuvaluan, which would be classified as adjectives in English. Generally, verbs can be identified by the tense marker which precedes them (usually immediately, but occasionally separated by adverbs). Verbs do not change form because of tense, and only occasionally undergo gemination in the plural. Passive and reciprocal verbs undergo some changes by the use of affixes, but these forms are used infrequently and usually apply to loan words from Samoan.^[11]

The distinction between verb and adjective is often only indicated by the use of verb/tense markers and the position of the word in the sentence. Adjectives always follow the noun they reference. Adjectives regularly change in the plural form (by gemination) where nouns do not. Many adjectives can become abstract nouns by adding the definite article *te*, or a pronoun, before the adjective. This is similar to English adjectives adding the suffix *-ness* to an adjective to form a noun.^[11]

Adverbs usually follow the verb they apply to, although there are some notable exceptions to this rule.^[11]

Articles

There are three possible articles in Tuvaluan: definite singular *te*, indefinite singular *se* or *he* (depending on the dialect) and indefinite plural *ne* or *ni* (depending on the dialect). Indefinite and definite concepts are applied differently in Tuvaluan from English. The singular definite *te* refers to something or someone that the speaker and the audience know, or have already mentioned – as opposed to the indefinite, which is not specifically known or has not been mentioned. The Tuvaluan word for ‘that’ or ‘this’ (in its variations derivations) is often used to indicate a more definite reference.

Pronouns

Like many other Polynesian languages, the Tuvaluan pronoun system distinguishes between exclusive and inclusive, and singular, dual and plural forms (see table below). However, it does not distinguish between gender, instead relying on contextual references to the involved persons or things (when it is necessary to identify ‘it’).^[11] This often involves the use of *tangata* (‘male’) or *fafine* (‘female’) as an adjective or affix to illustrate information about gender.

	Singular	Dual	Plural
First person inclusive		<i>taaua</i>	<i>taatou</i>
First person exclusive	<i>au(aku)</i>	<i>maaua</i>	<i>maatou</i>
Second person	<i>koe</i>	<i>koulua</i>	<i>koulou</i>
Third person	<i>a ia, ia</i>	<i>laaua</i>	<i>laatou</i>

Possessive pronouns

Possessive pronouns are composed of three elements: a full or reduced article; designation of *o* (inalienable) or *a* (alienable) for the possession; an additional suffix related to personal pronoun. Whether an object is designated alienable (*a* class) or inalienable (*o* class) depends on the class of object. Inalienable generally includes body parts, health, origin, objects acquired through inheritance, personal things in close contact to the body, emotions and sensations, and ‘traditional’ possession (e.g., canoes, axes, spears, lamps).^[10]

Dialects

Tuvaluan is divided into two groups of dialects, Northern Tuvaluan, comprising dialects spoken on the islands of Nanumea, Nanumaga, and Niutao and Southern Tuvaluan, comprising dialects spoken on the islands of Funafuti, Vaitupu, Nukufetau and Nukulaelae. All dialects are mutually intelligible, and differ in terms of phonology, morphology, and lexicon. The Funafuti-Vaitupu dialects (which are very close to one another) is the *de facto* national language, although speakers of the Northern dialects often use their own dialect in public contexts outside of their own communities. The inhabitants of one island of Tuvalu, Nui, speak a dialect of Gilbertese, a Micronesian language only very distantly related to Tuvaluan.

Tuvaluan is mutually intelligible with Tokelauan, spoken by the approximately 1,700 inhabitants of the three atolls of Tokelau and on Swains Island, as well as the several thousand Tokelauan migrants living in New Zealand.

Literature

The Bible was translated into Tuvaluan in 1987. Jehovah's Witnesses publish Watchtower Magazine on a monthly basis in Tuvaluan. There is also an "Introduction to Tuvaluan" & "Tuvaluan Dictionary" both by Geoffrey Jackson. Apart from this, there are very few Tuvaluan language books available. The Tuvalu Media Department provides Tuvaluan language radio programming and publishes *Fenui News*, a Facebook page and email newsletter.^[12]

The writer Afaese Manoa (1942–) wrote the song "Tuvalu mo te Atua", adopted in 1978 as the country's national anthem.

Oral traditions

Although Tuvaluan does not have a longstanding written tradition, there is a considerable corpus of oral traditions that is also found in the Music of Tuvalu, which includes material that pre-dates the influence of the Christian missionaries sent to Tuvalu by the London Missionary Society.^[13] The missionaries were predominantly from Samoa and they both suppressed oral traditions that they viewed as not being consistent with Christian teaching and they also influenced the development of the music of Tuvalu and the Tuvaluan language.^[6]

Academic study and major publications

There has been limited work done on Tuvaluan from an English-speaking perspective. The first major work on Tuvaluan syntax was done by Douglas Gilbert Kennedy, who published a Handbook on the language of the Tuvalu (Ellice) Islands (<http://www.tuvaluislands.com/lang-tv.htm>) in 1945. Niko Besnier has published the greatest amount of academic material on Tuvaluan – both descriptive and lexical. Besnier's description of Tuvaluan uses a phonemic orthography which differs from the ones most commonly used by Tuvaluans - which sometimes do not distinguish geminate consonants. Jackson's *An Introduction to Tuvaluan* is a useful guide to the language from a first contact point of view. The orthography used by most Tuvaluans is based on

Samoan, and, according to Besnier, isn't well-equipped to deal with important difference in vowel and consonant length which often perform special functions in the Tuvaluan language. Throughout this profile, Besnier's orthography is used as it best represents the linguistic characteristics under discussion.

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